



How Glenn Beck Helps Us with “Social Justice”

Social justice is the forced redistribution of wealth with a hostility toward individual property rights under the guise of charity or justice.

Glenn Beck, Premier Radio Networks

*The earth is the Lord's
and everything in it.*
Psalm 24:1

If you were spared, perhaps mercifully, the nationally aired debacle over “social justice” in March, let me quickly recap it for you. Fox News personality Glenn Beck used both his syndicated radio show and his weekday television show to admonish Christians to flee any church, priest, or pastor that utilized the phrase “social justice” because, according to his logic, it is code language for “communism or Nazi-ism.” The anticipated backlash, at least as covered by the mainstream media, was as immediate as it was prolific. Several religious leaders from across the ecumenical spectrum spoke up in defense of social justice, a notion they explained to be a central tenet of their faith. Leading the countercharge was Sojourner’s Rev. Jim Wallis, who responded with an exhortation to the faithful “to leave Glenn Beck” in the same way that one would leave a show (or a church) that promoted or condoned pornography. Beck then called Wallis a Marxist, and so on.

While many were quick to weigh in on the theologically and intellectually vacuous dimensions of Beck’s comments, it behooves us to go beyond a visceral response and consider the goal of his

admonishment. Politically, if one can assume that the content of talk shows of this genre is indeed politically calculated, the move seems rather reckless, given the growing number of conservative-leaning evangelical megachurches actively addressing AIDS, human trafficking, climate change, poverty, and other concerns that can be considered “justice issues.” While it is likely that some Fox viewers were offended, it would appear that the primary objective was to further divide and conquer the church ideologically by canonizing freedom from government as an article of faith. Indeed, Beck is generous in his clarity when he asserts that the term “justice,” or even “charity,” is merely a guise for the forced distribution of wealth “with a hostility toward individual property rights.”

As a father of four children, all within six years of each other, I can relate to this hostility. Sharing does not come naturally. I’ve endured many years of “Mine!”

“Social justice,” theologically speaking, is a redundancy. Biblical justice is inherently social.

“I had it first!” “She grabbed it from me!” “How come he has two?” and “Give that back!” The litany goes on, whether it revolves around toys, candy, or time on the video game console. The native instinct is to acquire, possess, protect, and accumulate more. It is wearying to play the arbiter for property cases, especially for a group with 24 possible relational permutations. But what makes the existence of these grievances most irksome is the fact that my kids don’t really “own” the stuff they have to begin with. They assume they have a right to the things that my wife and I have given them to use, to enjoy, to share.

Thus, Beck’s line in the sand helps us by forcing important theological questions for the church. As Christians, how are we to understand “individual property

rights” in light of the One we worship, the God who owns the earth and everything in it? How do policies that focus on the rights of “individuals” fit within, or compromise, the grand Genesis design of creation that appears to thrive on a diversity and interdependence that is also powerfully captured in the body theology of the Pauline epistles? What does it mean for us to live by grace (i.e. everything I have has been graciously given to me) in a society entrenched in a culture of rights and entitlement?

Finally, Beck challenges our definition of “social justice.” It’s important to note that one will not find this phrase in any Bible word search in any translation. It simply doesn’t exist in the Bible, and for one simple reason: “social justice,” theologically speaking, is a redundancy. In other words, the Hebrew word for justice, *zedakah*, also used for “righteousness,” has to do with living rightly before God and, consequently, with one another. In a word,

biblical justice is inherently social. And because it is social, it goes way beyond notions of retribution, punishment, or material “fairness.” It is about the restoring and healing of relationships, community, wellbeing—in a word, shalom. This is a notion of justice that Americans, on either side of the ideological spectrum, are incapable of discussing, let alone living. And because they can’t, it is imperative that we do. ■

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